DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 024 PS 019 032

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TITLE Overview of the IEA Preprimary Project.
PUB DATE 15 Sep 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the Palais des Congres (Brussels, Belgium, September 15, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Day Care; Early Childhood Education; *Individual Development; International Programs; Preschool Education; Program Descriptions; *Quality of Life; *Research Design; *Research Projects; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Program Characteristics; *Questions

ABSTRACT

The aims of the International Education Association's Preprimary Project are to examine developmentally relevant characteristics of the socialization environments of 4-year-olds in participating countries, and to ascertain the relationships between those characteristics and selected developmental outcomes. Phase I of the project consists primarily of a household survey of families. The survey concerns families' use of early childhood care and educational services and family characteristics. Phase I questions include the following: (1) In what settings are the 4-year-old children cared for? (2) What is the child's day like? (3) Who pays for the support of the settings, and what services are included in them? (4) Why are children placed in the settings? (5) What is the nature of the relationships between parents and caregiving settings? A major focus of the project is an attempt to arrive at an accurate picture of what it feels like to be a 4-year-old in the settings in which they are participants. In general, quality of life affects long-term development more powerfully than features of the environment. When adults' and children's views of the world diverge beyond an optimal extent, the child's view of the world provides the most predictive information. (RH)

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Overview of the IEA Preprimary Project

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Palais des Congres
Brussels, Belgium
September 15, 1990

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Overview of the IEA Preprimary Project

Lilian G. Katz, Ph. D.

As you know, the IEA Preprimary Project that you will hear about today was born here in Liege in 1981 under the leadership of Prof. DeLandsheere. I am here in place of Dr. David Weikart, President of the High/Scope Foundation, Michigan, U.S.A., who was unfortunately unable to join us, and sends his apologies. Dr. Weikart has been the International Coordinator for the Preprimary Project since 1985.

My task this morning is to sketch the broad outline of the project; my colleagues who follow this overview will present more detailed and specific information about the work that has been accomplished so far in their respective countries.

Impetus for the Project

The impetus for the study can be attributed largely to two trends that emerged and converged during the 1960s & 1970s in most IEA member countries, namely

(a) increasing acceptance of the proposition that the experiences of the early years of life make a strong and perhaps enduring contribution to all subsequent development, and

(b) increasing rates at which families began sharing the care and education of their preschool age children with others outside of their own homes, due largely to increasing maternal employment.

When considering these two trends together we must keep in mind the probability that the greater the contribution of early experiences to the total development of an individual and of a society, the more benefits will accrue to them from good quality early experiences and, in the same way, the more harm can be done to both the individual and the society if the quality of the early experiences is poor. Therefore, any investigations that can illuminate the nature and effects of various child care and early childhood experiences on the long term development of young children are welcome additions to our knowledge.

The trends referred to above created substantial pressure on local, regional and national governmental agencies to;

(a) meet the growing demand for preprimary programs,

(b) to understand more fully the impact of the quality of these provisions on children's subsequent development,

(c) to develop sound & practical policies in matters relating to preschool provisions, &

(d) to examine the gap between the policies governing preschool provisions and their actual implementation.

The IEA's extensive experience of coordinating educational research suggested that an international study could illuminate these issues in ways that studies of individual nations alone cannot. The examination of national and cultural variations in experience and environments provides a "natural laboratory" that can help us to disentangle the factors that affect children's development in ways that studies of single cultures cannot. Because many countries were facing the same policy issues in various degrees, the IEA invited a group of early childhood specialists to develop a plan to study them.

Overall Aim of the Preprimary Project

The overall aim of the Preprimary Project is to examine developmentally relevant characteristics of the socialization environments of four year old children in participating countries, and to ascertain the relationships between those characteristics and selected developmental outcomes.

The study has been designed to be conducted in three inter-related phases, as follows:

Phase I:

This phase consists primarily of a household survey of families and their use of early childhood care and educational services, and some of the characteristics of the families, and of the services they use;

Phase II:

A sample of settings identified in Phase I will be studied closely in order to ascertain the Quality of Life of the children in the various kinds of settings in which they spend their time;

Phase III:

Consists of a follow-up study, at age 7, of the development of the children studied in Phase II, and examination of their progress since the end of their preprimary experience.

Today's conference is focussed mainly on Phase I, and about what has been learned from it so far. I propose to describe briefly the main questions Phase I of the study is designed to address, and to make a few remarks about our hopes for the rest of the study.

Questions Addressed in Phase I of the Preprimary Study

The aim of Phase I of the study is to answer the following questions:

1. Where are our four year old children?

This may seem like a strange question to Belgians! You know where all of your four year olds are. Some other countries do as well. But because many of us have either very little or very poor information about provisions for four year olds, and because the situation in many countries is fluid and fragmented, we put this question at the top of our list. With the information we collect, we hope to be able to describe the variety, types and characteristics of the main settings in which four year olds spend their time in each of the participating countries. Today you will hear some of the answers to this question in six of the eleven countries that have been collecting data on this question.

2. What is the children's day like?

This part of the study is designed to find out about the daily routines of our four year olds. We want to know who they are with, who takes care of them, how many different kinds of settings they experience per day, and so forth.

3. Who pays for the support of the settings, and what services are included in it?

In many countries there are intense debates concerning who should pay the costs of the out-of-home provisions for young children. In many there are also arguments about whether and how the cost of early services is related to their immediate and long term effects. In the future, our data should be able to address these arguments.

4. Why are children in the settings that have been identified? Children may be in a given setting for a variety of reasons: e.g. none other is available, the mother wants to work, the mother does not want to work but is obliged to do so, the parents desire early *scolarisation* of their young child, the child has special needs, and so forth. We hope to be able to learn about the extent to which families are satisfied with available provisions, how well the available services match their intended purposes, and the expectations of their clients.

5. What are the relationships between the settings like? There is good evidence to suggest that the relationships between parents and those who are responsible for their children in other settings such as preschools, contribute in important ways to the child's experiences in the setting. We therefore hope to learn more about how the frequency and nature of the contacts between a child's parents and his other caregivers affects his development. Information is also being gathered about the larger social, economic and political context in which the child lives. Some information about the characteristics of the community and its policies concerning young children and their families have also been collected during the first phase of the project.

During the next two phases, more detailed information about the settings and children's experiences within them will be examined.

Quality of Life of Young Children

From the outset of this project, the steering committee adopted the concept of Quality of Life as a major focus of its attention. This means that we wish to know not simply where children are, who they are with, and what their daily and weekly lives are like. We want to have the kind of information that will enable us to infer as accurately as possible what it feels like to be a four year old in the settings in which they participate.

Almost any large survey can align data along two distinct dimensions: the 'view form above,' that is typical of national statistical summaries and commonly referred to in English as "head counting," and the 'view form below' that is the world as seen from the eyes of the child. Whereas the view 'from above' enumarates the rates of participation in preschools, in family day care homes, etcetera, the view 'from below' indicates our best inferences about how the child himself experiences the activities, ideas, interactions, emotional climate etc, of the setting - no matter which one it is: whether it is the home, the preschool, or a neighborhood playground, and so forth.

Normally, when adults examine characteristics of settings for children, they are assessing them 'from above.' On the basis of the best available theories and knowledge concerning how children grow, develop, and learn, assumptions are made about the impact of what is observed from above on the children's ultimate development. The view from below takes the individual child as a starting point and attempts to infer what it feels like to be that child in that particular physical, material and interpersonal environment. Thus the view from above tells us something about the **quantities** and **qualities** of selected things and events in the environment,

while the view from below addresses questions about the **Quality of Life** of the individuals within it.

To further complicate the picture, the Quality of Life experienced by a given child in a given setting is related to the context in which he or she lives, of which the out-of-home setting is only one part. For example, a child who has very few interesting things to play with at home might find the preschool setting more stimulating and interesting than a child who has many things to interest him at home. This latter child might even find the preschool environment - compared with what he is accustomed to at home - understimulating, and he might attempt to stir things up and make them more lively and animated through his own efforts! Thus the Quality of Life in the preschool setting is different for these two children, but only if you take the view from below rather than the view from above.

Similarly, a child who is accustomed to frequent positive feedback at home might experience the absence of such feedback in a preschool a source of hurt feelings, or even feelings of discouragement and rejection; but when the relative frequencies are reversed, and there is more positive feedback in the preschool than at home, the dynamic developmental consequences might be quite different.

Another example - one of considerable concern in some countries in the West as well as in the People's Republic of China - might be a child who has no siblings, who is the only child at home, and who has two very attentive parents and four very attentive grandparents; this child might expect and demand a high level of teacher attention and responsiveness in the preschool

class. Those of you who are teachers know from your own experience that one of two of such children in a class of 20 or 25 children can cause considerable difficulties for the teacher, especially if the ratio of adults to children is very low. However, it might be that such children who are surrounded by perhaps 6 very attentive adults would find this experience of being one in a fairly large crowd of 20 or 25 other four year olds a great relief or even escape from excessive parental and grandparental solicitude; and still others with the same family composition and home situation might feel abandoned or lost in the big crowd of peers. In other words, the critical variables are not so much the characteristics, events, the activities, or even the behaviors in the setting, but the meanings children attribute to those events, activities and behaviors. In attempting get the view from below, we are attempting to find out what meanings individual children apply to their experiences.

There are many possible examples of these contrasts between what is observed in an environment from above; and what that same environment might feel like from below. Ideally there is a strong relationship between the two views; but it seems reasonable to assume that the younger the child is, the more idiosyncratic and less conventional the meanings he gives to his experiences are. As children grow they become increasingly socialized into the culturally shared meanings of events and behaviors. It is for this reason (as well as several others we do not have time to discuss today) that teachers of young children need more skill in interpreting children's behavior and in understanding their unique ways of defining their worlds than teachers of older children do.

We hope to be able to get both perspectives on the lives of young children in our study: the characteristics of the settings in which young children spend their time, and the Quality of the Lives they lead in them.

Based on what we now know about the long course of development it is reasonable to assume that the view from below - the Quality of Life - affects long term development more powerfully than the features of the environment as seen from above, and that when the two views diverge beyond an optimum amount, it is the world as seen through the eyes of the child that provides the most predictive information.

Summary

In the next few days the IEA Preprimary Project national coordinators will be working hard to plan the next phase of the project. The work is long and hard. But we take it as axiomatic that the well-being of each of our children is intimately and inextricably linked to the well-being of all other people's children. The preprimary project is one part of what we hope is an increasing effort to find out how to assure all children a good Quality of Life.